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ECHOES

Justice, Peace and Creation News 23/2004

overcoming violence against women and children

GUEST EDITORIAL

"On the Wings of a Dove"
Overcoming Violence Against Women and Children

In the last two decades, women's desks and programmes of the international ecumenical community have put a high priority on overcoming violence against women. Perhaps one of the most important gains from these years of struggle has been to name and bring the issue of violence against women out into the open. However, many churches still remain silent on this issue. The Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women (1988-1998) highlighted violence against women as a key issue for churches and urged them to break the silence surrounding this issue. There have been many efforts, mostly by women, to overcome violence against women and children. Notwithstanding the accomplishments made, there is still a high rate of male violence against women. Our societies continue to produce far too many men who assault, abuse and kill women. The home is an unsafe place for far too many women and children and even in churches, the shame and injustice of clergy abuse remains hidden and unchallenged.

In times of war and conflict, violence against women becomes even more exacerbated and hundreds of thousands of women and children suffer daily from unimaginable forms of physical, psychological, emotional and sexual abuse. There are countless horrible examples throughout the world of atrocities committed on women and children. Resistance to violence is often met with unbearable additional brutality. Women have even been sliced to pieces in front of family members. Despite the prevalence of rape as a war strategy, soldiers continue unpunished. In 2002, after the religiously-motivated conflict in Gujarat, India, survivors described how women arrived stark naked and severly brutalised at a relief camp for victims. What kind of human beings commit these atrocities in the name of religion and their God?

Where is the voice of the church as women and children weep? Should the church not weep with them? The church is still the one place to which many women look for solace, comfort and peace. Yet, there is no adequate attempt to speak out clearly against this injustice and to minister to those who weep. We can no longer afford to treat violence against women and children as a marginal issue. It must be an issue of priority and heard in sermons, prayers, litanies, liturgical dances, songs and seen on church calendars and in mission priorities. Church leaders must challenge theology which legitimises male dominance over women. They need to organise Christian education materials and widespread re-reading of the Bible, especially texts found in Paul's letters to the Ephesians, Corinthians and Colossians which churches use to teach about marriage and family life. These are just a few examples of texts which have often been misinterpreted to prescribe male control over the family and submission of women, even to the point of submitting to abuse. The time is now for churches to give significance to efforts made by women and to invest in their ministry and mission. More and more, women in the church are being empowered to no longer be silent. Like the Canaanite women (Matthew 15.21-28), they "leave all protocol unobserved" as they break down barriers and demand to be heard.

Violence against women needs to be seen within a broad framework of gendered power relations with the understanding that the causes and solutions to violence are not only personal but also social, political and structural. Transformation of gender relations needs to be included in studies at every level in the church where people learn about God, themselves and one another. Men must be included in discussions on understanding how theology, ideas and beliefs shape the values of girls and boys, women and men, determine male-female

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relationship, and the way society deals with violence against women and children. Violence against women and children is a concern not only for women, but also for men. Men need to be enabled to play their role alongside women in dealing with violence against women. Men's partnership with women in overcoming violence against women and children is important for many reasons. These include the fact that most perpetrators of this type of violence are men and also that most leaders of churches and secular institutions are men who are in positions of power and influence.

On November 25, 2004 churches all over the world will be launching a 16-day campaign "On the Wings of a Dove: Overcoming Violence Against Women and Children", November 25 - December 10, 2004. The main purpose of this campaign is to engage the churches in developing pastoral and practical responses and actions to overcome violence against women and children. This is part of an annual global campaign initiated by the women's movements in society which began in 1991 and marks a high rallying point for women, and networks on overcoming violence against women. November 25 commemorates the brutal murders of three sisters in the Dominican Republic in 1960 and has been designated UN International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. December 10 is International Human Rights Day, a sign of the fact that violence against women is a violation of human rights. The 16-day period also includes World Aids Day (1 December) and the anniversary of the Montreal Massacre (6 December, 1989), when a man gunned down 14 women engineering students. Churches are urged to take leadership in their communities in raising awareness and publicly condemning violence against women and children. Churches are also encouraged to work with civil society in putting in place measures and mechanisms to deal with this type of violence and in working towards overcoming it.

This issue of Echoes is dedicated to women who weep for their children and for themselves; to women and men who are committed to overcoming violence against women and children, and to those whose lives have been broken but have dared to hope for peace with justice.

"My heart is torn with anguish and the terrors of death come upon me.
Fear and trembling overwhelm me and I shudder from head to foot.
Oh that I had the wings of a dove to fly away and be at rest!
But I will call upon God; Yahweh will save me."
(Psalm 55.4-6, 16)

Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth
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November 2004

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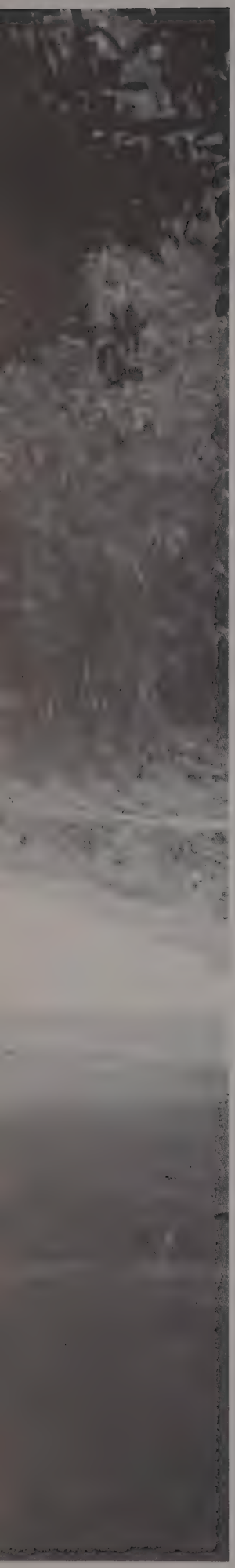
THE DUNDEE PRINCIPLES

GENERAL PRINCIPLES and OBJECTIVES for CHURCHES SEEKING to OVERCOME ALL FORMS of VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

The following 'Dundee Principles' were set at a meeting of representatives of all the major Christian World Communions in Dundee, Scotland, in August 2001:

1. Reflect on biblical and theological perspectives that impact attitudes and behaviour in relationships and church practice
2. Implement educational strategies which will develop awareness and training in all parts of the church community (local, national, international, and for lay and ordained, where these distinctions are applicable)
3. Commit ourselves, and encourage our churches, to use language that is not violent and does not exclude the experience of anyone
4. Sustain a safe environment within the faith communities where all will be empowered
5. Achieve good practice in all church structures for prevention and intervention
6. Be 'Church together', understanding and affirming diverse theologies, cultures, languages and structures
7. Effect and develop a network of concerned persons and church bodies which can enable the sharing of resources, understanding and good practice
8. Work in partnership with the wider community in overcoming violence against women
9. Ensure funding in order to realise goals
10. Adopt an agenda which will address all issues that concern violence against women and its consequences for individuals, faith communities and societies



CHURCHES WORLDWIDE SHOWING THEIR COMMITMENT TO OVERCOMING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Let our initiatives include:
- creating opportunities and places for women to speak out fearlessly about the violence and abuse they experience, so that the culture of silence can be broken;
- exposing all sexual abuse, especially by those in positions of church leadership;
- creating restorative justice processes where both the victims of violence and the perpetrators can experience, in truth-telling, the power of forgiveness and reconciliation;
- eliminating all biblical and theological justifications for the use of violence;
- denouncing all initiatives of war, taking steps to delegitimize war, and seeking alternative, nonviolent ways to handle conflict;
- denouncing female genital mutilation, sex-tourism and trafficking of women and children.

(Together on the Way: Official Report of the Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Ed. Diane Kessler, WCC Publications (Geneva) 1999, p. 245)

These challenges to churches worldwide came as part of a 'Letter from the Decade Festival - Churches in Solidarity with Women' to the delegates gathered at the Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Harare, Zimbabwe, December 1998. During the Decade Festival, the many and various manifestations of gender violence had been discussed, and women who have suffered different forms of violence within the church had spoken out with courage, calling the global Christian community to account.

Responding to this call, the Assembly delegates formally acknowledged that violence against women is a sin and offence against God, and encouraged all churches to engage in constructive efforts to overcome such violence in all its forms in both church and society.

Soon after the 1998 Assembly came the optimism of a new millennium, and in January 2001, the Christian hope of a Decade to Overcome Violence. But in today's world, successes in achieving peace with justice either locally or globally are hard to identify, as the crucial importance of all work on overcoming violence is highlighted and reinforced by current events. For women in many places, the violence and abuse has worsened as poverty increases vulnerability to prostitution, slavery and trafficking, rape and torture of women are used as weapons of war, and family violence continues to be hidden and denied in communities worldwide.

In the face of these realities, churches around the world are demonstrating a commitment to overcoming violence against women. National and international churches, Christian communions and ecumenical bodies have recognized and denounced violence, published reports and discussion documents, created new policies, established models of good practice. Some have also produced worship and Bible study materials and a few, mainly individuals or small groups within churches, have re-examined the theology and teaching which has been used to justify violence.

In the Summer of 2001, representatives of all the World Christian Communions came together in Dundee, Scotland, to exchange information and look for cooperative ways forward. At this Dundee consultation, a set of principles and objectives for churches seeking to overcome violence against women was developed. These, named the Dundee Principles, have become established as appropriate guidelines for churches and Christian bodies everywhere who wish to deal with the issue of gender violence.

Some of this work of the churches has been facilitated by a small WCC Project on Overcoming Violence Against Women, which operates globally from an office base in

Scotland, U.K. It functions as a contact point for an expanding network of concerned people which includes the participants at the Dundee consultation, theologians and academics, clergy and lay Church workers and leaders, Christians working practically to tackle violence against women in religious or secular contexts, people who have been contacted through seminars, conferences and consultations, representatives of women's desks in churches and ecumenical bodies. Through these increasingly wide networks of contacts the project can gather and circulate information, answer queries, facilitate discussions, canvass opinion and put people with similar interests in touch with each other.

The project also holds the WCC's unique resource collection of over 1500 documents relating to violence against women. These are almost all papers and articles rather than books and they come mainly, though not exclusively, from church or other Christian contexts. Requests to supply examples of particular types of material are fulfilled whenever possible, and have included church policies on domestic violence for a national church writing a new policy, training materials for use in an African context, information for a theologian doing research into Church attitudes to prostitution and worship materials. New materials are being collected all the time, as churches and other Christian bodies produce policy documents, statements, resources for Bible study etc., as part of their commitment to overcoming violence against women. A dossier containing examples of good practice from different Christian traditions around the world is being prepared for publication in 2005.

Many churches too are preparing to be part of On the Wings of a Dove: a worldwide campaign on overcoming violence against women and children, during the 16 days of 25 November to 10 December 2004. This period each year marks The 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence, an international campaign which began in 1991. Every year, all around the world, imaginative action by grassroots organisations and women's networks raises awareness, and inspires change, to overcome different forms of violence against women.

- November 25 is the anniversary of the brutal murders of three sisters in the Dominican Republic in 1960 and has been designated UN International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women.
- December 10 is International Human Rights Day, a sign of the fact that violence against women is a violation of human rights.

The 16 Day period also includes World AIDS Day (1 December) and the anniversary of the Montreal Massacre (6 December), when a man gunned down 14 women engineering students.

In 2004, for the first time, churches and Christians worldwide will be adding their voices to the campaign, reminding themselves and other Christians that all violence against women and children is a sin and offense against God, and declaring their commitment to overcoming it. There will be special services and events, workshops and exhibitions, and opportunities for individual and group Bible study, prayer and reflection. Resource materials are already available for all aspects of the On the Wings of a Dove campaign on the website www.overcomingviolence.org

ECHOES readers with a particular concern for overcoming violence against women, who are not already linked in to the networks mentioned in this article, are invited to contact the WCC project:

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Psalm 69

Save me, o God,
for the waters have come up to my neck.
My feet can no longer touch bottom
in the deep mire where I am sinking.
I have screamed my heart out,
my throat is so hoarse,
I have waited so long for my God
that I hardly dare hope any longer.

More in number than the hairs of my head
are those who hate me without any cause.
Those who are unjustly against me,
and want to ruin me completely
have me totally in their power.
I am supposed to pay back money I do not even owe.

God, you know how innocent and naïve I was;
that I am partly to blame for my situation
is no secret from you.
Do not let those who wait and hope for your help
be troubled because of me.
Let those who seek you, o God of my people,
not face scandal and shame because of me.
For your sake I bear my disgrace
and my face betrays my shame.

I have become a stranger to my own sisters and brothers.
If they knew
how I earn my living here,
they would refuse to know me any longer.
It was, it is, longing for the life in all its fullness
which you have promised to all the world,
which has brought me low.
The insults of those who scorn your name
have fallen on my head.
Weeping bitterly, I fast
while they make fun of me.
If I were to seek justice in a court
they would pull me to pieces,
and my tormentors would sing drunken songs about me.

My prayer rises up to you, O Lord.
Let the time come for me to receive mercy.
In your great love, answer me,
with your faithful help, rescue me.
Reach down, pull me out of the mire
before it closes over my head.
Snatch me away from those who are destroying me,
save me from the floods rushing over me,
do not let the deep waters drown me
or the Pit swallow me up.

Answer me, God,
for it is so comforting to be embraced
by your kindness and motherly love.
Do not hide your face from your daughter.
I am so afraid!
Answer me quickly,

come into my life with your help,
redeem my life,
buy me back, because of my enemies.

You know how I am insulted and shamed,
you know who they are, my tormenters.
Shame has broken my heart and brought me to despair.
I long for someone
who sees me and cares about my pain
but no one is there.
I long for someone
to take me in her arms and comfort me
but I cannot find anyone.

They put drugs in my food,
and when I am overcome with thirst,
all I get is a bitter drink, which numbs me
but does not quench my thirst.

Let their own table full of food make them sick
and be a trap for them.
Let their eyes be struck blind,
so they can no longer gape at me,
and let their loins
be impotent forever!
Pour out upon them your punishing anger
and let your burning indignation overtake them.
Let their houses be laid waste, so no one can live there.
For they persecute
those whom you have already punished enough
and they make fun of the pain
of those who are already deeply wounded.

Add guilt to their guilt
and do not let them have any place in your justice.
Let them be blotted out of the book of life;
let them not be included among the righteous.
I am in misery, my whole body aches.
Help me, o God, and protect me.

I will praise the name of God with a song;
I will magnify God with thanksgiving.
My sisters with whom I share this slavery
see me, and sing their gladness;
those who looked to God for counsel and help,
find new courage in their hearts.
For God hears the voice of the poor and needy,
God identifies with those in bondage,
and does not despise her own.

Let heaven and earth praise God,
the seas, and everything that moves in them.
For our country is precious to God, she will help us,
and will build the cities again,
so that her people may live in them,
and make their living with what they have there.
And this our descendants will inherit,
and those who love God
will be able to live there
in peace.

translation from the perspective of a woman
trafficked into forced prostitution
by Eva-Sibylle Vogel-Mfato

THE DOVE CARING BEYOND CHARITY

Reflection for Opening Worship «On the Wings of a DOVe» Manila 2004

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him, he passed by the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near to him, and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denari, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him, and when I come back, I will pay you whatever more you spend. Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

(Reading: Luke 10:29-37)

Imagine how different this story would be if it was about women... Imagine the religious woman, the ordained one, passing by on the other side. Then the Levite, another woman of high status... What of the one whom Jesus, in his culture and time, called the Samaritan? That person in the original story was from a despised group, on the margins, with scary religious ideas. Which women are marginalised in your country? Who might she be? Maybe a prostitute, Dalit, differently-abled... or even just a post-modern feminist. She was the one who not only gave first aid but provided for ongoing help for the battered woman.

She - the victim - is also significant for us. That road between Jerusalem and Jericho was known to be dangerous, infested with bandits and criminals - probably peasants who had been thrown off their land by oppressive landlords - and for whatever reason she chose - or was forced - to take this perilous journey.

In my community at home, the victim would have been blamed - "she asked for it", people would say. A few years ago there were "reclaim the night" marches where large groups of women went out in the streets at night to demonstrate that the danger did not come from the women but from men who were out under cover of darkness. Yet - as we know too well - women remain vulnerable especially in the dark and lonely places.

Maybe thinking of these characters as women makes the message more potent for us: Jesus was describing good neighbourly behaviour, and here we have the helper showing amazing kindness to one who would not have been seen by society as free from blame. This surely has implications for us as our sisters who may be poor or marginalised or beaten are too often re-victimised by public opinion.

There are the victims that society decides are deserving of its kindness - and then there are the rest who are usually at the bottom of the socio-economic heap. That is the trap with charity. It is charity that might have set up a house to receive the battered - if they were from the right kind of background; it is charity that might have fed the media frenzy about the dangers of this road. It is not charity that would have ensured a safe way was available for those who had to make this journey, or that the bandit gangs were not being fed by peasants forced off their land.

Charity would not work for structural or systemic change - because it would challenge the people in power. Charity is a mindset and a set of institutions that feed on inequality and injustice for existence... if those with power worked against inequality in society, there would have been much less need for charitable works. From local helping groups to international aid agencies, the Good Samaritan rules unchallenged as the necessary motivation and justification of Christian welfare work.

We all know the basic story: the Good Samaritan pitied the battered traveller, risked her or his own welfare to intervene, used her or his own limited supplies, took the patient to an inn, stayed as long as possible and provided for continuity of after-care.

As I have just shown by asking us to imagine the story with female characters - there are other ways to look at this parable from the way we were taught it in Sunday School.

In the early centuries, it was known as the Story of the Man who Fell among Thieves. You have to remember that the titles and sub-headings that are in some of our Bibles, and even the chapters and verses are not in the earliest texts. In fact nowhere in the writings of the early church fathers or Mothers, is the story ever called the parable of the **Good** Samaritan. More to the point, the Samaritan of the story is never conscripted into the designation **"the Good Samaritan"**. This undermines any claim that it is a gospel precept that we are to behave as "Good Samaritans". Curiously, this fits with the silence of Luke's Gospel on the value description of the Samaritan — a point which becomes critical to new thinking about the story.

Because in later centuries the emphasis was changed in how the story was interpreted in nineteenth century Europe and by the missionaries it spawned. The confidence that strutted through church and society at the time, the great wealth of the English church, the conviction that this level of comfort was taken to be not merely a sign of God's providence but also a responsibility that was to be exercised wisely for the benefit of wider society, including throughout the world. All of this gave us The Good Samaritan, which became the symbol of the Church, called to exercise charitable beneficence. The widening gap between rich and poor was rendered inconsequential and set the scene for the violence that we see today in global poverty.

"All things bright and beautiful" were only available to the poor as their social and economic betters provided for them both as individuals and as whole nations. The Samaritan approvingly identified with the propertied or the merchant class and directly opposed to such banditry, to the landless natives on the road.

In my own country Aotearoa-New Zealand the very high number of Maori in prison and in violent gangs and simply being poor is a direct consequence of their ancestors being stripped of land and livelihood a century ago - but charity as shown in this story made the settlers feel better.

The position and response of the injured one to be an example to others, dependent, thankful and acquiescent, the image of the deserving poor. The story had thus become interpreted to confirm the duty of acts of charity and the duty of industrious gratitude.

Now recent scholarship offers us another possibility. The wounded man - or woman - occupies the highest place, and the woundedness is shared in some way by the Samaritan whom, we need to remember, stands at the margins if not beyond Jewish society. The wounded healer is given much attention in pastoral and theological writing today. It is even described as the only way to minister with integrity as we acknowledge our own story and by identifying our own fragility, stand in solidarity.

The Decade to Overcome Violence calls us to provide safe places for the telling of stories of suffering, survival and resistance, to link across groups and movements, international barriers, and generations in order to overcome violence against women and children, to expose theologies and church practices that collude with the abuse of power and lead to violence and to seek practical responses towards justice and healing.

Can you and I come to this task together as wounded healers? Can we stand with the Samaritan of the story vulnerable in the intimacy of our own brokenness? That's part of my hope for this week.

But back to the wider setting of the Bible story. In fact Luke's Gospel provides a critical question from the lawyer as the launching-pad for the story: as he - or she - asks "who is my neighbour?" The original question is restored to prominence with Jesus' return question "who of these three seems to you to have been neighbour...?" Given that the lawyer's question was asking who was his neighbour and Jesus' question asks, effectively, who became neighbour, the link between the lawyer and the wounded man is tightened. The question becomes "By whom should I like to be succoured in distress?" rather than "Whom should I assist in case of distress?" The parable undercuts the lawyer's pretensions about his own position in society, and blurs any divisions between deserving and undeserving. Far from being wealthy, settled, reputable, attractive, the lawyer has become, in the story, like the wounded man: half-dead, polluting, a potential unwitting trap for further attacks by lingering bandits.

The scandal and offence of such a story can awaken a consciousness of shared woundedness where help can be offered which is not status bound. Acknowledging woundedness, and ministry from that position, continues to struggle for acceptance within my church at home in Aotearoa NZ. It seems to be trying to preserve its own position under a cloak of righteousness, obedience and certitude, that is, a position of moral uprightness, something Samaritans were never accused of in the ancient world! Ministry to the poor (however defined) is still preferred to ministry with the poor and certainly to ministry from or by the poor. The woundedness of society - and of our world - is a woundedness shared by the church, which is as much in need of neighbourliness as in being a neighbour - no matter that the neighbour does not appear recognisable as one of us.

Another strange thing about how this story is now told is that the Samaritan took the patient not to safety but to a disreputable place as inns were then. They were known to be frequented by the dishonest and criminal. In no way could the Samaritan be called Good. Rather to those first listeners, he was foolish. If, this is a parable of the reign of God then God comes astonishingly as disreputable and promiscuous. Recognising multiple interpretive possibilities in the reading of this parable of Jesus invites us to consider different ideas and responses. More importantly, it invites us to let go of simplistic theological justifications for what we do, for example to dispense with reliance on a single parable that can probably only ever promote charity and dependency. Letting go of the well-remembered, serviceable, paternalistic "Parable of the Good Samaritan" can inspire us to be creative. We can use our imagining about the Samaritan story to encourage us to look beyond the familiar, to seek a more just, more equitable world that gives voice to the marginalised, dignity to the oppressed, liberation for the bound. Jesus called such things, the nearness of the reign of God. And She is very near!

16 - DAY PRAYER CAMPAIGN

FOR THE ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS OF

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

(Nov 25 - Dec 10)

Women and Gender Commission of the Major Religious Superiors in the Philippines, and the Institute of Formation and Religious Studies Student Body

Opening Prayer:

O God of Life,
You call us to respond with greater commitment
to the needs of women
for their development, rights, defense,
upliftment and freedom.
We are asked to define new ministries,
to make new roads in our apostolic strategies
to respond to new situations and new questions
of the poor and of women.

But sometimes, just sometimes
we lack the drive to take the risk.
Sometimes, just sometimes we need to be reminded
again of our lukewarm response.
We forget sometimes to take upon ourselves
the cause of women
in our everyday encounters with life.

And yet we believe in the united efforts
of women and men,
We believe that the power to create and re-create
is in our hands.
We remember and pray for each and every survivor/
victim of gender violence.

PLEASE LIGHT A CANDLE for every petition

Nov. 25: Women victims of domestic violence, battered wives, marital rape

Nov. 26: Victims/survivors of rape, incest, sexually abused/harassed

Nov. 27: Female infanticide and selective abortions, female genital mutilation

Nov. 28: Maltreated and sexually abused children

Nov. 29: Victims/survivors of sex trafficking and prostitution

Nov. 30: Women victims of unfair labor practice (e.g. contractualisation, etc.)

Dec. 1: Victims/survivors of AIDS

Dec. 2: Victims of war/militarism

Dec. 3: Victims of media violence

Dec. 4: Women migrant workers

Dec. 5: Women victims of sexual abuses in the church

Dec. 6: Women victims of violence/injustices from the rural areas

Dec. 7: Women from the cultural minorities who suffer violence and injustice

Dec. 8: Women/children who suffer from acute poverty and displacement

Dec. 9: For all victims of gender violence particularly violence against homosexuals (lesbians and gays)

Dec. 10: Women in death row and all those detained and victims of Human Rights Violations (HRV)

Final Prayer:

O God, unite us with your grace and wisdom.
Shower your blessings upon us as we look
forward to the age of peace,
when violence is banished,
both women and men are able to love
and to be loved,
and the work and wealth of our world
is justly shared.
We look forward to the future
in faith and hope.
May it come soon. Amen.

DEFENSELESS BABY JESUS IN THE MIDST OF THE DEFENSELESS CHILDREN OF THE WORLD

TS Maluleke

Readings

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:6)

... they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."
(Matthew 2: 11-13)

Reflection

He is the Alfa and the Omega. King of Kings. The Risen Lord. The Son of Man, the Messiah, the Christ, Saviour and Lord of Lords. These are the titles we use for Jesus. We sing, pray and worship him as such. Rightfully so; because for us; he is indeed Lord and Saviour. But how often do we pause to think that Jesus Christ was once a child? That God chose to introduce him into the world not as an accomplished adult bearded prophet descended from the thundering skies, a baby wrapped in cloths and placed in a manger. Through song, prayer and treatise; in books and in famous church councils we have theologised the person and identity and Jesus in ways that obscure and almost totally eclipse the fact that he was once a simple baby.

Seeing Jesus as a baby is no sheer Sunday School nativity play device to make his complex person and story

digestible to children. It is our fault that his person and story has been made so difficult and complex. Contrary to popular belief, the nativity is not a children's version of the story of Jesus. It is the story of Jesus. Jesus Christ came into the world as a baby. Like any baby, he was vulnerable to the conditions and diseases that contributed to infant mortality in his times. He was, as we well know, also vulnerable to the evil and jealous intentions of the Herods of his times. For such people children were at best a nuisance or a disturbance and at worst a threat rather than a sign of hope and the future. As a baby in a manger, wrapped in make-shift cloths, Jesus was at his most vulnerable. He was as vulnerable then as he was on the cross when he cried: 'My God, My God why have you forsaken me"?

Christmas time is time to remember Jesus as a baby who like other babies, was completely vulnerable and at the mercy of the adults in his life. Furthermore, not only was he born to an unmarried mother, he was born at an awkward place, to a parent who was clearly without medical insurance and any other from of assured protection from harm. Significantly, God did not take any chances with this child - unlike some parents and some societies today. God takes drastic measures to ensure the safety and protection of the child. Realizing that Herod meant to kill the child, God warns the shepherds of this in a dream and they return home by another route, avoiding a meeting with Herod. Why is it that our societies persist in the same old practices that put children at risk and are unwilling to explore 'other routes' that will save children? Realizing the resourcefulness of Herod and that he might find other ways of tracking down the child, God also sends an angel to advise Joseph to take 'the child and his mother and escape' and to 'stay there until I tell you'. As far as the safety of the child Jesus, God acted decisively and timeously.

In our societies today children (like women and the elderly) remain one of the most vulnerable groups. Not only are children grossly neglected, they are victims of untold abuse and suffering in many societies. Behind the walls of the neat homes of some middle class suburbs the world over, children are subjected to abuse - verbal, psychological, material and even sexual. The abhorrent phenomena of child pornography and child sex rings are also the perverted passtimes of the rich. All over Africa, we read stories of babies being raped and the rapists walking free due to lack of will by governments and courts alike. In the two-thirds world where poverty and lack are the order of the day, children are hardest hit. Hence we see them swelling the streets of our cities - so-called street children, without hope, without education and without food. It is often from the ranks of their like that killer child soldiers are recruited. In the wake of the devastation of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, many children in many two-third world countries have become orphans and 'parents' to their siblings at the same time. There are babies who contract HIV from their mothers during pregnancy and there are children who contract the virus at an incredibly early age

through rape and sexual abuse in the hands of adults.

If God went to so much trouble to protect and safeguard baby Jesus why is it that children and babies are so low in society's priority lists today? If God intervened so timeously and so decisively to save baby Jesus why is it that so many governments are so lax when it comes to children's rights? Christmas is a time NOT merely for us to mouth the age old Christological formulas and sing traditional Christmas hymns and carols. Similarly, let us not yield Christmas completely to the modern father Christmas - a not-to-be-trusted man who is clearly at the service of merchants and dealers. Nor should we make Christmas a time of Christian monopoly in some narrow, exclusive and esoteric way. Let us contest the meaning of Christmas and let us endeavor to re-habilitate it. Let us make this a time to focus on the fate of the baby and the child in our midst, for Jesus Christ whose birthday we celebrate on Christmas, came into the world as a defenseless child.

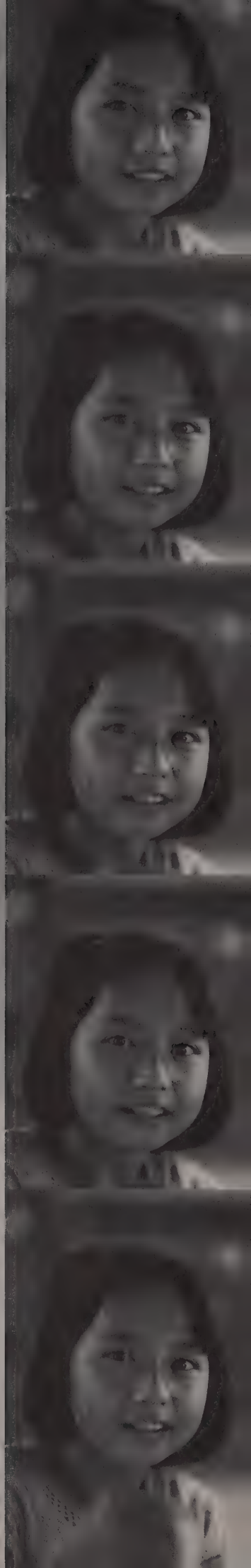
WE KNOW NOW

We know now
there is violence against women
in our very midst
in the churches
in Christian homes

We know now
that violence against women
exists in the church
is ignored by the church
is even justified by the church

We know now
that violence against women
happens in our very midst

Irja Askola



CONFRONTING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

MECC NEWS REPORT - Vol. 15 no1 - Spring 2003

"Some people say that what we're doing is setting aside the main national issues for the sake of this secondary and partial issue of violence against women," said Zoya Rohana of the Lebanese Council to Resist Violence against Women. "We see the killing and destruction in Palestine and Iraq, and other crises around the region. Nonetheless, we still insist on opening up issues of women's rights, and especially of violence against women. Our ability to face up to external crises is based on our ability to confront the crises that face us internally."

At the invitation of the MECC and the Lebanese Council, a conference on violence against women in the family was held on 6-7 June at the Commodore Hotel in Beirut. The conference drew academics, clergy, politicians, journalists and activists from both within and outside the region.

One of the other speakers at the opening session was Member of Parliament Nayla Mu'awad. She talked about how violence against women is something her fellow middle easterners inherit from their culture. If they wish to address violence against women, they must address how women are treated in the family. They must also look at the collection of customs and traditional values that dictate a lesser, dependent role for women in a male-dominated society. It is through these two aspects that they can change society to one that does not allow or tolerate violence against women.

Lebanese MP Nayla Mu'awad focused on how confronting violence against women requires confronting assumptions in the broader culture

While raising peoples' awareness of this issue, middle easterners need to correct their mistaken understanding of women's position and their rights. In order to rescue them from violence in all its manifestations, they must modernize our laws and institute harsher punishments for those who violate women's rights and particularly for crimes of violence against women.

Liza Gromeley of Amnesty International discussed her organization's work on violence against women. For the last ten years, AI has considered violence against women as one of the basic problems. It is something at the heart of the philosophy of the declaration of human rights, especially as we regard this as an international declaration—we have to create legal mechanisms that are international in scope that give us the ability to give a firm foundation to our arguments for the rights of women and for our rejection of everything that compromises women's dignity.

Rev. Dr. Riad Jarjour, General Secretary of the Middle East Council of Churches, asked the rhetorical question: why do we have all this persecution? Cannot our male societies establish their authority except by oppressing women even to the extent of physical abuse? In the West, women are called "the weaker sex"—we call them "the lovely sex"—have we men so caricatured women that they have become nothing but a body we use as a commodity in the marketplace—and in some cases a body over which we break our sticks? The answers to these questions are available to anyone who looks around—they've been recorded by women battling for their rights throughout the world. Those fighting this battle affirm that they are not to be dominated, they are to be equal, part of a shared humanity. We are not to be taken in by those who say that the subservience of women only reflects the unchanging natural order that God created. What we see in prejudice against women is in fact a cultural phenomenon— it is something that can be changed.

International documents defining violence against women in the family. Ms. Pamela Patten of the UN body responsible for preventing violence against women,

Doctor Rafiq Rida Saydawî, Dr. Suhayr at-Tal. Ms. Patten emphasized that every country in the world has signed the international declaration against violence against women, and that this gives NGOs and others working for womens' rights a lever that they can use to budge the institutional and cultural inertia that often keeps governments from implementing fair laws protecting women from domestic and other violence. But it is up to the NGOs to use this mechanism, to let the UN and the UN Office to End All Forms of Violence Against Women know what is happening.

Ms. Pamela Patten, of the UN Office on Ending All Forms of Violence Against Women, emphasized the importance of NGO workers working with the UN office to bring pressure for change

Ms. Asma Khodr, a human rights lawyer based in Jordan, and Amal abd-al-Hadi, presented the group with a documentary film covering legal protection in cases of family violence. The film, by Nadine Tomeh and Sayfin 'Urayyis, exposed the weaknesses of civil laws and punishments in the Arab world dealing with violence in the family.

One session was devoted to a pair of religious scholars discussing their religions' views on violence against women. Both Greek Orthodox Metropolitan Georges Khodr and Shi'ite religious scholar as-Sayyed Hânî Fahas were critical of their own traditions as they have approached the issue of violence against women.

Following these presentations Ms. Danielle Hâyik, Ms. Amil Yûnis, and Dr. Manjiyyah as-Suwayhî presented various aspects of how the laws of personal status in the Arab world, both Christian and Muslim, affect the struggle to end violence against women.

Dr. Manjieh as-Suwayhî of Tunisia discussed her country's so far successful experiment in cracking down on violence against women.

Dr. Suwayhî talked about the Tunisian experiment in attacking violence against women. Tunisia has instituted serious punishments for domestic abuse, and has managed to enforce them consistently. Although there is still some resistance in the culture, this committed government action has made inroads into the problem-surveys show that domestic violence is down across the board, and that people's attitude to domestic violence is also changing.

The conference on its final day attended to summary reports on international efforts in the campaign to end violence against women by the World Council of Churches (Helen Hood) and Amnesty International (Liza Gromely). Participants then broke up into working groups to deal with several relevant aspects, direct ministry to violated women, agendas for research, reformation of the laws, and training, awareness building and communications. This led into the exercise of approving the closing statement.

The opening session of the conference was heavily attended by activists, clergy, journalists and others.

(Translated from the Arabic by Lew Scudder)

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN THE FAMILY AND SOCIETY

Beirut, Lebanon, 5-7 June 2003

A conference organised by the Justice and Human Rights program of the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), in cooperation with the Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women (LCRVAW)

CONFERENCE CLOSING STATEMENT

The Regional Conference on Violence Against Women received papers and engaged in discussion dealing with issues related to violence against women in the family in the Arab world, its cultural, juridical and religious dimensions. It also examined international charters, analysed the problematics involved in this phenomenon, and the mechanisms for combating it. The conference concluded by stressing the need to strengthen and develop the instruments for combating violence against women.

The recent waves of violence that have inundated the Arab world and that have crested in Zionistic aggression against the Palestinian people and the Anglo-American occupation of Iraq have helped sanction violence against women. Participants in the conference (and all people, for that matter) are called upon to pay special attention to the circumstances in which women find themselves in Iraq and Palestine.

In this context, conferees shared their various experiences concerning what is being done by non-governmental

organisations to combat violence against women. And the confusion bred by widely divergent conceptual understandings of what constitutes violence against women must be cleared up.

Given this foundation, participants drew up a list of both conceptual and practical recommendations for how to carry forward the effort to combat violence. With respect to Arab governments, they demanded of them that they take the necessary steps to combat this phenomenon through new protective legislation aimed at violence in the family, and, in existing laws, through purging them of all aspects of prejudice against women. Thus they will fulfill their international commitments especially as regards the Arab laws of personal status.

LEBANESE THEOLOGIANS ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

From lectures by Metropolitan Georges Khodr and as-Sayyid Hânî Fahas

MECC NEWS REPORT - Vol. 15 no1 - Spring 2003

Two of the most creative Lebanese theologians addressed the conference on violence against women. They are, in the order in which they spoke, Metropolitan Georges Khodr, Greek Orthodox bishop of Mount Lebanon, and as-Sayyid Hânî Fahas, prominent Shî'ite Muslim intellectual.

Khodr: We need to change our theology

Men have been thoughtless about what benefits them and their families. It has never crossed their minds that their wives give every bit as much to a marriage. From the day the breath of life first entered creation, man has thought of himself as the mover and the giver; woman, on the other hand, he pictured as the recipient. For this reason he had the right to seek gratification from her, and to discipline, beat and humiliate her.

Bad theology has bred evil practices. We must change the theology of the patriarchal system and strike it down so that women need not forever suffer humiliation. Christ came and struck at male dominance. Most of his followers did not come over to Christ's side; they remained prisoners of a despicable historical heritage. But what interests us is Christ himself. Man and woman share a story of a common spiritual life. Without it, then what is left is the mentality of rape by the man of the woman.

I said 'spiritual story' because the social development of more highly civilized countries is no better. Family violence is endemic in France. Some of those in Lebanon who beat their wives are university professors. Devotion to Jesus—not in the doctrinal sense but in the sense of our being caught up in Christ's gentle-heartedness—is the mild breeze that rescues us from the battle between man and woman, revealing to them both the profundity of their being one flesh.

Humanity has always sought out scapegoats. In the context of the family, this mentality says that woman carries forward the sin of Eve against her man. But Jesus said, 'The solution is not for God to slaughter the people; the solution is for God himself to die in place of the people.' In your God, you yourself live for the sake of the other person. This is the antidote to violence because, in the bond of marriage, it means a sharing husband and wife practice toward each other, and the eternal tension between dominating male and dominated female is done away with.

As for removing violence from the home, the issue is how to do away with all violence. The Sermon on the Mount defines the path of Christian ethics. In it Christ said, 'You have heard it said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I say to you, Do not resist evil but whoever strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.' The meaning of this is that evil is not overcome by its mirror image. You overcome evil with gentle-heartedness. Only gentle-heartedness is capable of overcoming hatred in the other. In our search for answers, perhaps stronger is Jesus saying, 'You have heard it said of old, Do not kill, and whoever kills shall be brought to judgment, but I say to you, Anyone who hates his sibling deserves to be condemned.

Marital violence is a special manifestation of our lust for killing. The woman who is beaten, in the heart of her spouse exists as one already dead even though she might still be physically alive. Morally speaking, the bond of marriage has been broken and she has been exiled into her former loneliness.

There is no doubt in my mind that Christianity is a religion of non-violence. The early Church fathers denied

even the right of self-defense. Let us proclaim that violence continues to be illegitimate no matter what some modernists may say. We have no need to search out scriptural verses that explicitly forbid violence in the household. The gospel calls us to that which is both higher and more profound. Earlier than that, I do not see any Old Testament sanction for beating women, even though the Torah sees woman as an extension of the person of the man.

Passion alone is not sufficient. Love tames passion, and roots it in God. When God takes charge of our heart, we become able to say to the Lord what al-Hallâj, the Muslim mystic, said to him: 'Your place in the heart is the whole heart.' When that happens, woman will see evidence of the Lord dwelling in us.

Fahas: Democracy, violence against women linked

We are unable completely to stop violence against women without the force of justice, the law and legal process. There is no such thing outside of a democratic society — the stronger the democratic link, the more assured the process of justice. But we have no such link.

This is our concern, we who are concerned about freedom, justice, equality and the building of community without infringing upon identity. Our fear is a function of our haste, of how we scale our priorities. What I say does not imply that we will become violent. Rather let us contrive our own secularism, our own modernity, one compatible with how we were formed, not in order to distinguish ourselves from the other, but in order to guard the context and process we desire. The modernization we desire will have its own peculiarities, but it must be closely guarded against becoming a cover for secular arbitrariness.

At this point I would like to praise the Tunisian experiment. It does not defy modern legislation. But I reserve judgment about the distance between the cultural and relational improvements that have been achieved and the corresponding political improvement that has not. Our situation remains exposed and vulnerable to the autocrat's whims, much like Iraq's tyrannical secularism that dressed itself up as a national champion during its war against Iran, as a regional champion in its invasion of Kuwait, and as a religious champion when Iraq itself was attacked.

Now let us get back to violence against women. Islamic law bears no responsibility for it. It is a historical and social issue. Therefore, let us come together to stop internal violence and the external violence that leads to war. Wars breed specific acts of violence. Those most exposed to such violence are women, and especially wives. Let us strip men of their special role in war so that widowhood does not become normative and so that the aptitude of men to dominate does not increase. Men get caught up in their enemy's warlike example, an enemy who may, indeed, be their neighbor in the other house, their partner in practicing the additional violence against their wives.

THEY TOOK OFF THEIR CLOTHES

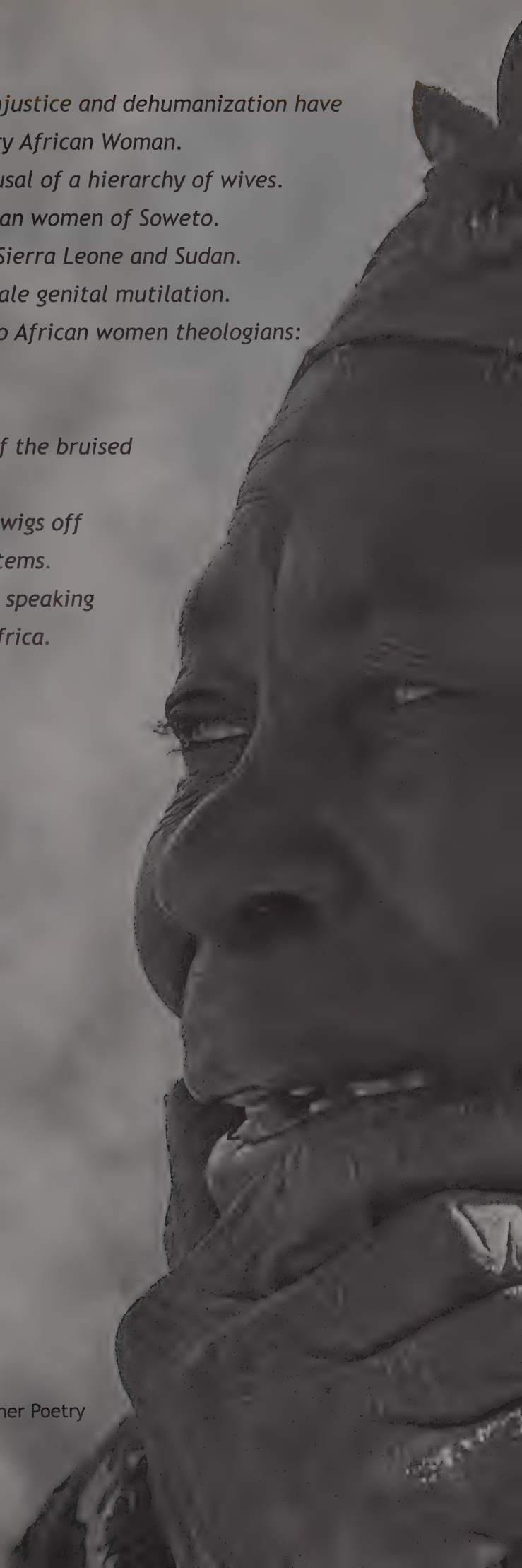
They took off their clothes
Desperate to overcome violence
The fire of condemnation of injustice
Flashes from their eyes
When eyes are red, they do not light a fire but see
The fire of condemnation of injustice
Flashes from their eyes.

They took off their clothes
Yes they did in anger and disappointment
They took off their clothes when all admonitions failed
Desperate to overcome injustice
They took off their clothes
It is a taboo to see mother's nakedness
It spells doom on all callousness
The fire that pours from their eyes
Destroys all that destroys our humanity

Yes there were the Aba women
In full Monty
But there were many more
Resisting injustice is a right
Yaa Asantewaa spits in the face of a British officer
South African women burn their passes
Queen Nzinga outwits a Portuguese officer; and
Nehenda goes to the gallows crying out
«I shall return»,
And so she does.

Yes Nehenda and all our forebears who resisted injustice and dehumanization have
Returned. Hence the strength of the contemporary African Woman.
They have returned in the Ghanaian woman's refusal of a hierarchy of wives.
They have returned in the defiance of South African women of Soweto.
They have returned women peace negotiators of Sierra Leone and Sudan.
They have returned in Somali women against female genital mutilation.
They have returned and so Betty Govinden calls to African women theologians:
«May we no longer be at ease»

Women in health services have taken the cloth off the bruised
and mutilated bodies of women.
African women lawyers are taking the gowns and wigs off
patriarchally conceived and constructed legal systems.
Spouses, yes, wives of heads of African states are speaking
truths to one another, disclosing the malaise in Africa.
May we no longer be at ease
Till all hidden fetters are revealed and broken.



From: Poems of Mercy Amba Oduyoye
Edited by Elizabeth Amoah

First published in 2001 as «An African Heritage of Feminist Consciousness: Mercy Amba Oduyoye, The Woman Through her Poetry

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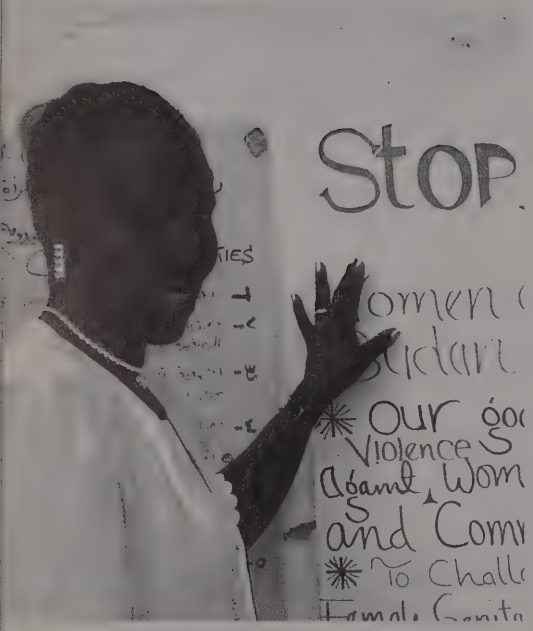
Peace is at the door...

women to women solidarity visit to Khartoum, Sudan

Aruna Gnanadason



It is a sense of deep hope that peace is coming that we as a team encountered when we visited Khartoum and nearby Medani in early July this year. The World Council of Churches/All Africa Conference of Churches organised a women to women solidarity visit to Khartoum, Sudan to listen to the women and to bring back to the international community their concerns, as expressed in their own words. In yet another war torn country we see that it is women who have acted resolutely to move for peace and to sustain the life of their communities.

21 years of war have left deep scars on the psyche of this nation. It is estimated that over 2 million people have lost their lives in this war. 5.5 million Sudanese have been uprooted by the conflict, 600,000 of them are refugees in other countries, mainly in Uganda, Chad, Ethiopia, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo. 250,000 people are said to have died due to the war-induced famines in the South of Sudan. (Statistics from Reuters Alert).

We were made aware of the particular plight of the children of the Sudan - those who have been inducted as child soldiers and "camp followers" (children who are abducted and used either for sexual purposes or to do domestic chores for the militia). Thousands of children continue to live in a context of violence and insecurity - driven into the streets, orphaned or left to fend for themselves by poverty-stricken single mothers who find themselves in prison for petty crimes.

Women, we observed, were hesitant to speak of the various forms of violence they have experienced and continue to endure. Darfur has once again shown how rape of women has been systematic, intentional, and has been used as a weapon of war and of ethnic cleansing. Government-backed militia have terrorized the peoples of Darfur so as to force them out of their lands.

We were able to speak to women who do not normally get a chance to tell their stories. The majority of the women in the Omdurman prison-, which we visited, are internally displaced women of African background, from the South of the country. They are in prison for petty crimes such as brewing of a local alcoholic drink. The warden himself acknowledged that the majority of the 823 women inmates in overcrowded and filthy prison were there not because they were wicked, but because of their poverty which drives them to find means for themselves and their children to survive.

The women in the desolate Joborona Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camp shared with us stories of desperation. Ironically the word

Joborona in Arabic literally means, "we have been forced". Many of these women have been repeatedly forced out of their homes only to find the houses demolished to make way for city planning and private housing colonies. Most of the people had just made a life for themselves and had built simple houses, when the Government authorities bulldozed their homes to the ground and forced them to return to makeshift houses made of cardboard boxes and plastic sheets.

In Medani, Gezira State many of the women shared how difficult it was, generally, to live in Gezira because of the lack of water, food, education, electricity, transportation, land, and jobs. (Ironically, Gezira State has been declared a model of development by the Government - the fruits of which are reserved for the wealthy Arab population, the women told us.) Another problem specific to life there was the abundance of mosquitoes and the consequent threat of malaria.

In Medani, women in the churches have taken leadership in nurturing the life of the congregation, assisting people to get to church and doing home visits. They have also been raising funds for the church. They have income generating projects such as making pottery, bedspreads and other handicrafts. Because most of the women are uneducated and illiterate, the women leaders appealed to us as an international delegation to help them to educate their women. They added that another major problem they are facing is the lack of access to schools for children, as they are unable to pay the fees. Due to the war, the women themselves have not been educated and now their children will not have the opportunity to go to school.

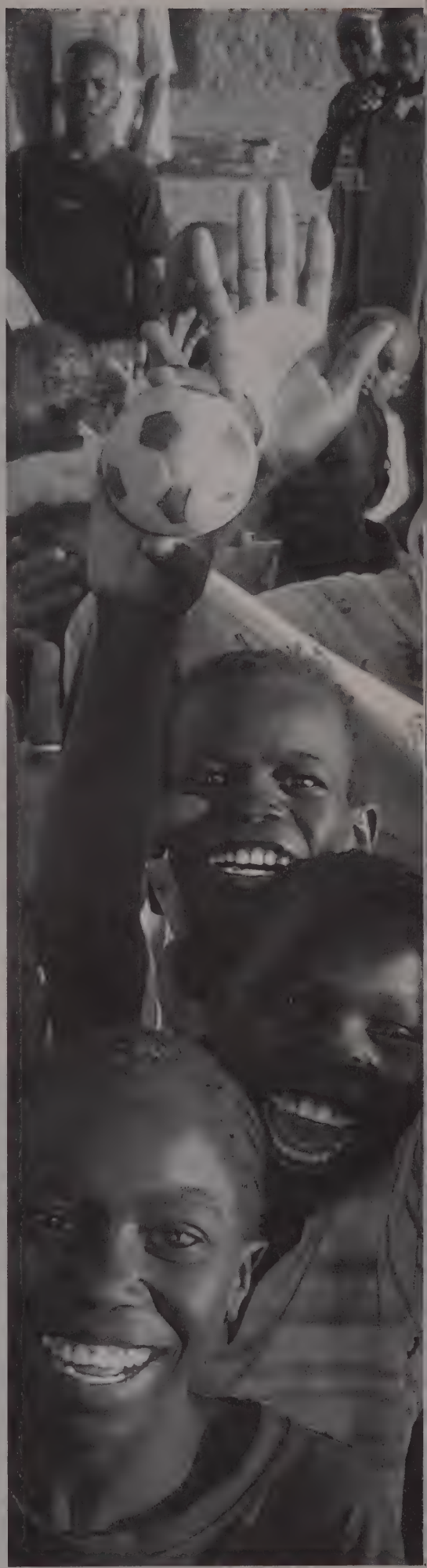
Domestic violence is also a real issue for these women. A woman from the village of Fao (named after the UN agency, FAO - Food and Agriculture Organisation that has set up its offices there) spoke of the problems women face working as house-helps. She claimed that many young girls are being violated sexually inside the homes where they work. "We don't know what happens there." Many domestic workers are 12 and 13 year old girls.

Perhaps the most dynamic and articulate of the women we met was Mama Elizabeth. A tall woman of the Dinka tribe, she demanded our attention, not only due to her stature but also the way she told her story. She introduced herself as a widow, and said she wanted to speak for other widows. In most homes of widows there is an average of six dependants, all of whom rely on these women. So, many of them end up having no choice but to clean other women's homes and clothes. They will do all they can to support their children. She explained that there is great wealth in the South, and the only reason they are in the North now is for reasons of security. The luxury of thinking about tomorrow is precisely that, a luxury. The women can afford merely to think about surviving the present day.

Nora, a woman from Yambio, added that "Aids is present here in the Sudan and we are so afraid of it - more than the war that has displaced us from the South." The Church, through Sudan Council of Churches (SCC), has trained pastors in HIV/Aids awareness, but according to her, more must be done. She said, "Aids is now the biggest war we have to fight."

Young women we met in one of the churches spoke of displacement, separation from families, street children, broken homes, loss of traditional values, lack of a stable psychosocial environment. These pressures affected their performance in their studies. Additionally, they have to cope with lack of transportation facilities to go to school, kidnapping, child soldiers and sexual abuse. They reiterated that HIV/Aids is a real threat to many young women.

Additionally, some of young women feel abandoned by their parents and find it hard to forgive their



parents who shirk their responsibility by blaming it all on the war and the bad economic situation of the country. One of them blamed the polygamous family structure for the fact that fathers are unable to support all their children. Divorce rates are high, we were told. One of the young women told us that they are unable to forgive the government. They feel the policies of the government are the cause for the creation of poverty and unemployment. She spoke of how many had lost their younger brothers who had been conscripted by the government for military training. Many church buildings had been burnt down and the government has done nothing, making them complicit in this.

Some young women have fallen prey to prostitution or to early marriages. Many are forced to leave their families in the South and now live with foster parents who sometimes ill-treat them, as they are a burden on their adoptive families who have their own struggles to survive as displaced people. Many of the girls work as house helps in the homes of the Arabs, where they often experience sexual abuse. One young woman shared the story that was typical of so many of the women we met - of how when they were in the South, their homes were destroyed, children were killed, boys were forced to rape their mothers and sisters or face death and girls were being abducted by militia.

Comments from the team at the end of the visit:

On the role of women in the new Sudan:
The women from the South who have lived in IDP camps in and around Khartoum for 10 to 20 years have experienced many changes in their lives and have had to overcome many borders set up by their own traditions. In the IDP camps the women have learned to live together across traditional tribal and religious differences. They saw that it did not matter if someone is from Dinka, Nuer or any other tribe. The importance was to see how they could survive and do something with their lives by working together. An example of this was the project Nyaret (Haj Yousif Displaced People's Camp). This is a community-based group of women from different tribes and religion including Muslims. The women here described this as the one good thing they have learned out of the war. In this way the women can build the foundations for a future peaceful Southern Sudan.

Additionally, because of the war women have found themselves in a new social role: either their husbands have been killed by the war or they are still in the war zone. Now the women have had to look after the children and be the breadwinner, as well as the decision-makers of the families. Even in families where the husband is still there, men from the South have difficulty finding jobs and it has been up to the women to go out and find jobs, while the husbands stay at home with the children. The women who have lived like this for a long period of time, have become used to taking decisions on all matters concerning the family. We discovered that they do not want to go back to their traditional and expected roles.

We believe that the women should be encouraged to raise their voices and take part in all decisions concerning their society. They are ready for it but now support is needed in education and leadership training of the women. Everywhere we went we witnessed the deep faith and spirituality of the women - their courage to hold their families, their society and their country

together. "Peace is at the door", they told us as they prepared themselves to return home to the South.

Economic reconstruction, an urgent need:
The economy of the South of Sudan and now the West of Sudan is in shambles. We were told there are few schools, health care facilities or economic structures to sustain the lives of the returnees. A serious effort has to be made by the international community to think of the economic reconstruction of the South. There is danger of the Sudan getting further embroiled in a global market economy and the international financial institutions (the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund) that will lead to indebtedness and long term injustice. The oil and mineral rich South, which thus far has not had any benefits out of its own resources is in danger of becoming the target of unscrupulous investment by multinational companies and powerful governments. Intentional and serious efforts need to be made to bring economic justice to a people and a region torn by a long war. This is another " forgotten war" we were reminded. Imaginative, creative and just efforts have to be made to ensure economic reconstruction. We are particularly concerned with the plight of women who continue to hold their families together and are held responsible for their survival. Ironically, women are not always able to get loans from banks without a male guarantor, we were told.

In the short term, economic survival initiatives of women are a way out of poverty. Many of the women IDPs we visited were engaged in some type of income generation activities like knitting and tie-dye but they all complained about the lack of markets for the finished products. When the products are not sold the entrepreneur is forced to abandon the trade, as it was evidenced in most of the stories we heard. There is also need for skills in corporate business ventures that are likely to increase the opportunities for the women to meet the conditionalities of micro financial institutions for loans. As an immediate solution the internally displaced women need programmes that can provide grants to facilitate their return, resettlement and reintegration; for diversified and market oriented income generation activities; and a safe secure enabling environment for entrepreneurial ventures. In the long-term the women need programmes that can give them life skills including entrepreneurial skills as stated above, not only to sustain them while they are displaced but as a source of self-reliance when they return to the South. They also need a secure Southern Sudan where they can return and start life afresh.

Trauma Counseling:
Listening to the extent of suffering the women have experienced, (many, we were told, have had painful experiences of rape and other forms of sexual violence), trauma counseling is imperative in the reconstruction of women's lives. We heard of not just the sexual violence women experience at the hands of the militia and the army, but also of domestic violence, in the context of the pressures the war has placed on families. Additionally, many women spoke of violence at the hands of the police or in prisons. Young women told us of the fact that many of them are forced into prostitution or sexual slavery at the hands of the militia or just to survive when they escape the war

and become IDPs. There were also the many experiences of sexual violence women face in dependent positions as house-workers etc.

Therefore, we believe great care needs to be taken to provide counseling and other forms of care to the women. This will form a very important part of the empowerment of Southern Sudanese women. The need for healing these memories cannot be underestimated, as it is so necessary in a post conflict situation. The women will therefore need safe, secure and confidential environments to talk freely about their pains in the war and in their displacement. There is urgent need for their psychological and mental healing. They also carry deep wounds of how they have been treated by the Arab/Muslim dominated North. This will also have to be addressed in order for healing and reconciliation to take place. Here, we believe the church has an important role to play.

Donor Fatigue:
This is a real fear that was expressed again and again. After all the humanitarian assistance that has gone into the 21 years of war, the people fear that now, when they need the international community the most, there may be a withdrawal of support. As the UNDP official told us, the return of more than a million internally displaced people and refugees in neighbouring countries in the next few months needs support. They are going into a South that has no infrastructure and facilities. Even security is not guaranteed. The call to the ecumenical movement to not forget the Sudan was loud and clear. Some expressed their doubts about the UN and its agencies which are also led by Muslims from different countries - will their commitment to the non-Arabs be whole-hearted, they wondered?

The South - will it be forgotten? There was genuine concern expressed that the Darfur situation may divert all humanitarian and other attention away from the plight of the South and of the urgency of the situation where millions of people need support as they return to their homes in the South. As IDPs, they need continued support. The message was clear to us, to go and tell the world that unless the international community maintains their support for the people of the South they have little hope of reconstructing their lives.

(This article is based on the report of the Women to Women Solidarity Visit to Khartoum, Sudan 29 June to 9 July 2004 which was organised by the World Council of Churches and the All Africa Conference of Churches together with the Sudan Council of Churches in Khartoum. The full report available on request from the World Council of Churches, Justice, Peace and Creation Team.)

NEW RESOURCES

Copies of ECHOES can be ordered from the WCC. The cost of producing and mailing ECHOES is US$ 5.00 per copy (equivalent to approx. 7.00 CHF). Readers who can afford it are strongly encouraged to contribute. However, please note that any contributions under CHF 20.00 (US$ 15.00) actually costs more than it is worth. Individuals willing to express their commitment to the Justice, Peace and Creation Team may also contribute in the same way. Please make payment either by cheque or to the following bank accounts with a clear mention that it is for the ECHOES magazine or the JPC Team:

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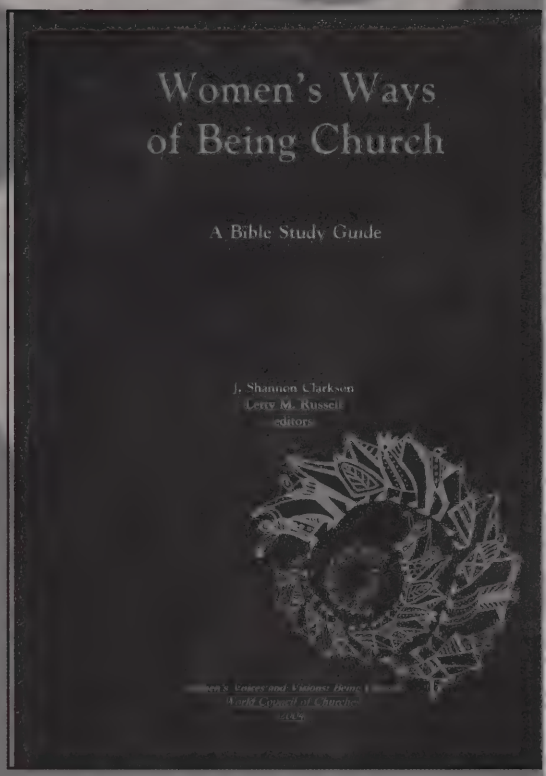
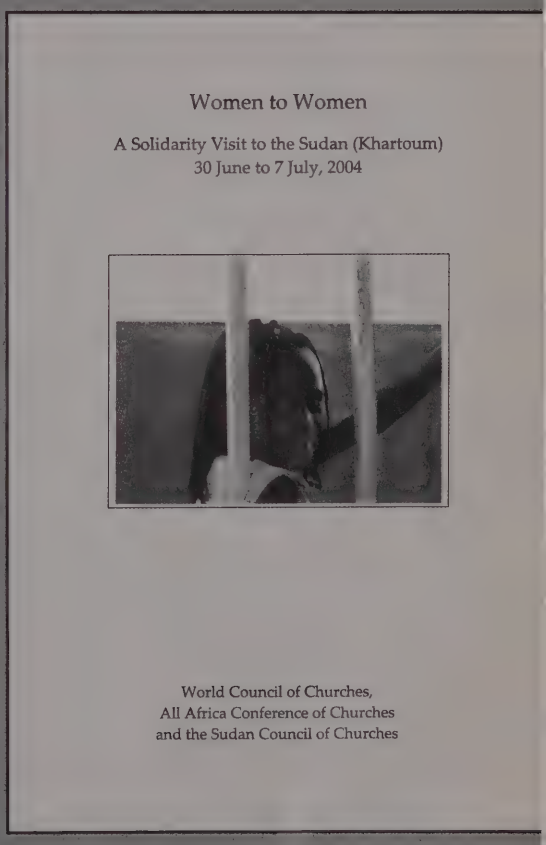
Women's ways of Being Church. A Bible Study Guide edited by J. Shannon Clarkson and Letty M. Russel



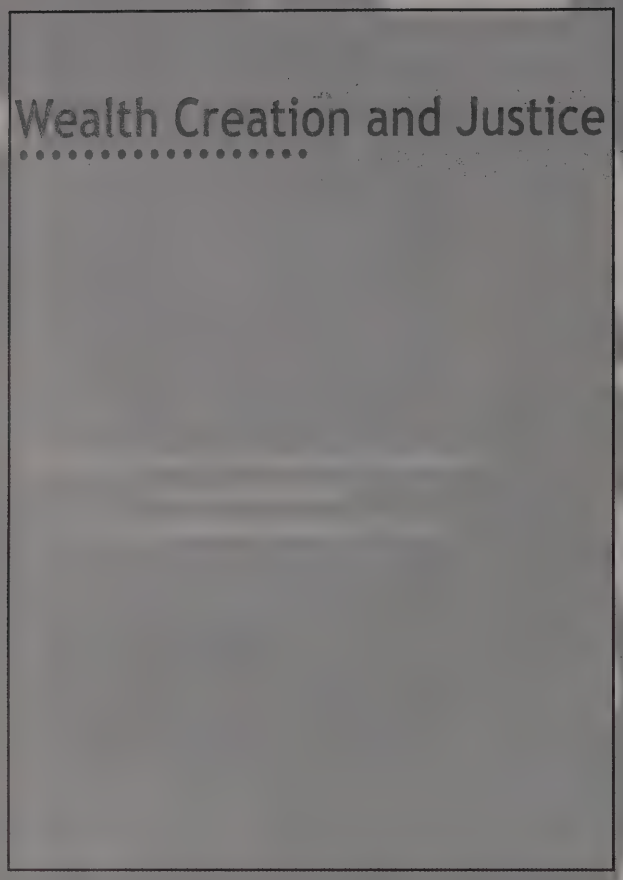
The Bible studies by Letty M. Russel, Sook Ja Chung, Nancy Cardoso Pereira, Eleni Kasselouri-Hatzivassiliadi and Mercy Amba Oduyoye accompany the WCC study process on Women's Voices and Visions on Being Church that picks up on the findings of the Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women (1988-1998). They ground this process in Biblical reflection and encourage women all over the world to raise their voice in shaping the presence and future of the church.

Women to Women. A Solidarity Visit to the Sudan (Khartoum) 30 June to 7 July, 2005 published by the World Council of Churches, the All Africa Conference of Churches and the Sudan Council of Churches



This is the more than a just a report on a women's team visit to Sudan, but an amazing and extraordinary account of the role played by women in this war torn country to achieve peace and to sustain the life of their communities. The team went to Khartoum (Sudan) to listen to the women and to bring back to the international community their concerns, as expressed in their own words.

NEW RESOURCES



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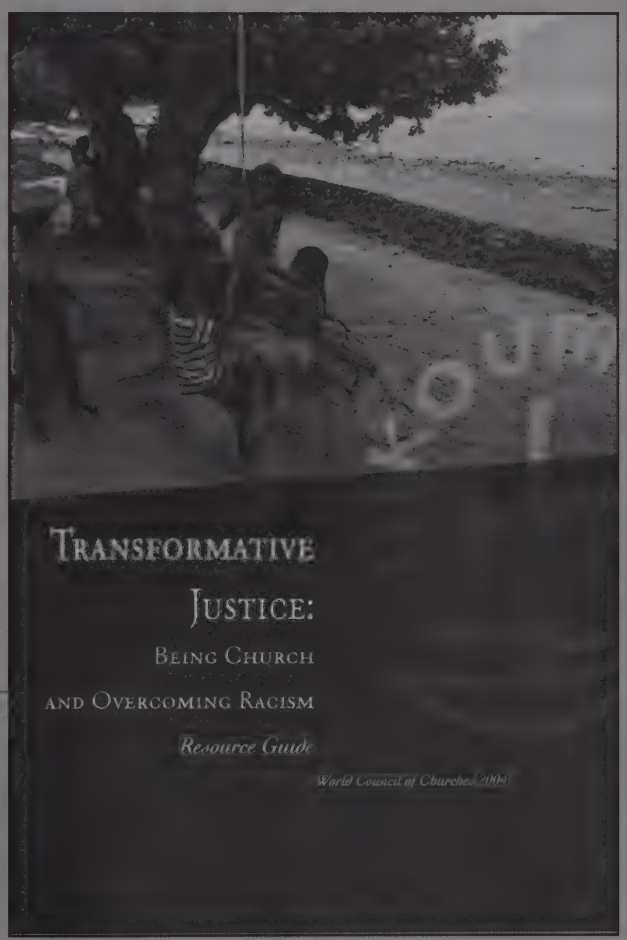
Transformative Justice: Being Church and Overcoming Racism
A Resource Guide by the Justice, Peace and Creation Team of the
World Council of Churches

Transformative justice is a tool and fruit of overcoming racism. It deals with past and present oppression and discrimination, but also with ways of transforming communities. Its goal is to achieve justice, healing, reconciliation and the re-establishment of people's relationships, of which restitution and reparation are also part. This resource guide is aimed at the churches, their congregations and members. It can also be used by groups in civil society which have a particular link with churches and their involvement in overcoming racism.



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